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MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

SUBJECT : An Assessment of Soviet Perceptions on SALT -
May 1977

You asked for an assessment of probable Soviet reactions to the latest US positions on SALT as follows:

--Strategic cruise missiles are now central to Soviet security/arms control concerns. The Soviets probably will press hard to incorporate limits on air-launched cruise missiles in the treaty through 1985 rather than in the three-year protocol.

--The strong Soviet resistance to interference with their ongoing strategic programs makes any but token reductions in force levels in SALT II unlikely.

--The Soviets are unlikely to agree to substantial reductions in heavy ICBMs in SALT II, although they might accept a token cut.

--The Soviets probably see a mobile ICBM ban-- which would head off a mobile M-X--as an attractive exchange for not deploying (and having to count) their own already-developed SS-X-16 ICBM.

--Given their concern about US technological advantages, it is highly unlikely that the Soviets will agree to any constraints on ICBM testing which would impede materially their planned improvements in current systems or development of new systems. Both new and modified Soviet ICBMs will be ready for initial flight testing during the period of the protocol. The Soviets may stick to the position that only new MIRVed ICBMs should not be tested during that time. They could meet substantially all of their missile test objectives in this period without testing a new missile with an actual MIRV payload. They could also claim--and the US would be

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hard put to disprove--that all their testing during the protocol period concerned modified rather than new ICBMs.

--The Soviets may give unilateral assurances that the Backfire bomber will not be deployed for a strategic role. But they will resist any collateral constraints that would limit its use in other roles, and they will not include Backfire in any way in a formal treaty.

--In further negotiations, the Soviets will use the issue of forward-based systems as a weapon to try to keep the US close to the Vladivostok framework.

The rationale behind these predictions of probable Soviet reactions is discussed below.

Cruise Missile Limitations

As the Soviet appreciation for the extent of the US lead in cruise missile technology has matured, this issue has increasingly assumed a central position in their SALT concerns. Their guiding principle with respect to cruise missiles in the post-Vladivostok negotiations, in their reaction to the US proposals in March, and in their own May proposals is to prevent the US from achieving a strategic advantage by adding this new dimension to the threat.

This concern suggests that the Soviets may offer a somewhat higher price for cruise missile limitations in future bargaining. Because the US Geneva position offers some limitations, they will be encouraged to explore the subject further. In connection with the US linkage between cruise missile limitations and Soviet reductions in heavy ICBMs, they may ease their position that the number of heavy ICBMs has been agreed and is not subject to revision, but any changes here will probably be minor.

Another real issue for the Soviets is the duration of constraints on air-launched cruise missiles. The strength of the Soviet attitude on placing air-launched cruise missile limitations in the Treaty rather than the protocol probably is rooted in the leverage they ascribe to the US. Currently, before a SALT II agreement--and again in 1985, when all issues once more will be open to negotiation--the Soviets themselves hold some strong cards.

But if they bargain their strengths into a long-term agreement and permit cruise missiles to be limited only for three years, then they foresee the US as having a disproportionate advantage in later negotiations to replace the protocol.

The greatest threat the Soviets see from cruise missiles is in the sea- and land-launched versions. To them, air-launched cruise missiles on heavy bombers do not by themselves tip the strategic balance qualitatively, because the number of heavy bombers will be constrained by the aggregate limit and, under the Soviet proposals, would be counted as MIRVed systems. But surface-launched missiles not limited by SALT would affect the balance because of their potential for deployment by the US and its allies in vast numbers within range of targets in the USSR. Their agreement that cruise missiles with a range less than 600 km would not be limited is necessary to protect their own anti-ship cruise missiles and probably promoted by a view that short-range missiles do not pose a serious threat to the USSR.

The Soviet position that heavy bombers equipped with air-launched cruise missiles should be counted in the MIRV total appears to be an indirect attempt to limit further the number of US ICBM and SLBM MIRVs as well as to constrain cruise missile deployments. This point and the insistence that cruise missile limits extend to 1985 will probably emerge as the hardest elements of future Soviet bargaining on cruise missiles.

Heavy ICBMs

The SS-18 heavy ICBM is seen by the Soviets as the key system for implementing a counterforce strategy. These missiles probably are regarded highly both for their ability to destroy hardened targets and for their political value. The Soviets evidently intend to have completed the conversion of all 308 SS-9 launchers at operational complexes to SS-18s by the end of 1980.

The US proposal to restrict conversion to 190 for the duration of the protocol probably is seen by the Soviets as some movement forward from the comprehensive proposal of March 1976. But the Soviet position remains that the issue was settled in the first

Interim Agreement of 1972 and at Vladivostok, and that further limitations on heavy ICBMs are unacceptable. The Soviets probably will remain wedded to this position with the possible exception of some token alterations in response to other US concessions. "Unofficial" Soviet spokesmen have mentioned recently the possibility of a ten percent cut in heavy missiles.

Mobile ICBMs

The Soviet proposal that the deployment of mobile ICBMs be banned during the three-year period of the protocol is consistent with their past record.

While the Soviets have developed a mobile ICBM--the SS-X-16--and the US has not, there is probably some ambivalence in their attitude toward its deployment. The SS-X-16 is limited in capabilities when compared to the other fourth-generation Soviet ICBMs, but we believe some of them are being produced. The Soviets probably would forego the deployment of the SS-X-16 if they were convinced that to do so would prevent US development of the mobile M-X ICBM.

As for the US position that the Soviets should make arrangements for verifying that launchers for the SS-X-20 are not capable of launching the SS-X-16, the Soviet position is that, because the SS-X-20 is not an ICBM, it is not subject to negotiations. The Soviets apparently view the SS-X-20 in the same light as the Backfire and do not wish to set a precedent of negotiating on what they claim to be a peripheral attack weapon. Eventually, they might provide some unilateral extra-treaty assistance on this point as they evidently are willing to do with the Backfire.

The Soviet position contained no prohibition on development of mobile ICBMs, and they did not respond to the US proposal banning further tests of the SS-X-16. Their apparent acceptance of a ban on tests of new MIRVed ICBMs, in their eyes, would probably not prohibit tests of the modified version of the SS-X-16 they are developing, even if it carries MIRVs. We believe that the Soviets would not consider a modified SS-X-16 to be a new ICBM.

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Reductions

The US proposed to reduce the Vladivostok aggregate and MIRV limits by 240 and 120 respectively, with reductions to be completed by October 1979. The Soviets responded by proposing a reduction of 150 in the aggregate, with dismantling not to begin until after 1980.

To meet either of these lower aggregate limits, the Soviets would have to retire systems such as Y-class SSBNs, and SS-11 or SS-13 ICBMs. They would be reluctant to dismantle these systems, which still have many years of useful service. Yet they recognize the need, from a political standpoint, to respond to the idea of reductions.

Their Geneva move to put off any reductions until after 1980 probably reflects their commitment to current plans and programs; 1980 marks the last year of the current five-year plan. Changes are harder for the USSR--with its tradition of planning, which it conducts in five-year blocks--than for the US--which revises its five-year projections annually in a rolling fashion, although they could nonetheless make some alterations.

Equally important, if the US is to be freed of cruise missile constraints when the protocol expires in 1980, the Soviets do not want at that time to be in the position of already having made substantial reductions in their own intercontinental systems.

Finally, the Soviets have a general resistance to reductions because, to reach an equal lower ceiling, they would have to make cuts, whereas the US would not.

The Soviets did not react to the US proposal regarding a lower MIRV limit. During the negotiations leading up to Vladivostok, it appeared that they were willing to accept MIRV limits lower than 1320. Our best estimate now is that--under SALT II based on Vladivostok--they intend to field close to 1300 MIRVed systems by about the mid-1980s.

The Soviets might be willing to accept reduction of 120 from the 1320 MIRV limit since it would have a corresponding dampening effect on US MIRV programs and, under their proposal, on deployment

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of long-range air-launched cruise missiles. The key to Soviet acceptance of lower MIRV limits probably lies in whether the US agrees to count heavy bombers equipped with long-range cruise missiles in the MIRV total.

The Soviets have indicated a willingness to accept the US MIRV counting rule that would require them to include in the MIRV total some systems which actually contain single RVs. Should they accept a reduction in MIRVed systems from Vladivostok levels, they could become more resistant to the US counting rule, since at lower levels there would be a penalty imposed on their planned programs either for single RV or MIRVed versions of their newest ICBMs.

Backfire

The Soviets have steadfastly contended that the Backfire bomber is not a strategic system, and they have been unmoved by US arguments that it could be used for intercontinental attack. They will continue to adhere to the principle that SALT is not the environment for them to make concessions on non-strategic systems. Because the US is not now insisting that Backfire be included in the formal treaty, the Soviets probably see a softening of the US position.

The Soviets probably will provide some collateral assurances not to provide a strategic role for Backfire. Assurances which deal directly with strategic performance--no new tanker force or no training with acknowledged heavy bombers--they might find palatable. Other assurances which the US has proposed--no flights north of 63° latitude or a ceiling on production--would surely be regarded by the Soviets as interference with their legitimate use of a non-strategic system and would be rejected.

Testing of New ICBMs

The Soviets have strong incentives to continue ICBM improvements during the next several years in order to narrow or overcome US technological advantages. We believe there are at least six ICBMs now under development--three we classify as modifications of existing systems, two we classify as completely new missiles, and one that is difficult to classify. Four of these systems, including the last one, probably will be ready for flight testing during the proposed period of the protocol.

The Soviets probably would expect that, under a ban on testing of "new" ICBMs, they would be able to do a great deal of testing that they could represent as involving existing ICBMs. We estimate, for example, that through modifications of existing systems the Soviets could achieve accuracies comparable to that potentially available with Minuteman III.

Given their incentives to improve their ICBM force characteristics, the Soviets would probably plan on following one of two routes under a testing ban:

--if MIRVed ICBM testing were prohibited, they could fulfill most of their requirements with single-RV tests, leaving open the option of subsequent MIRVing;

--if all "new" ICBM testing were prohibited, they could conduct considerable testing and represent it as the improvement of existing missile systems, knowing that the US would have difficulty in identifying and proving the contrary.

Moreover, we encounter many difficulties in applying the distinction between "new" and "modified" ICBMs, and some of our designations are necessarily rather arbitrary. This is due not only to limits on our information, but also to inherent difficulties in drawing a line between "new" and "modified" even in the presence of considerable data. The Soviets could be expected to stretch to the limit the definition of "modified."

The apparent Soviet position at Geneva would ban testing of new ICBMs only if they were MIRVed. An agreement along this line would give them a different kind of maneuvering room. They could continue development of all new systems using a post-boost vehicle with little or no change in their program by conducting initial flight tests with a single RV (as they did with the SS-18 in an unconstrained environment) and achieve qualitative gains in preparation for post-protocol negotiations. Subsequent incorporation of MIRVs on a missile already tested with a post-boost vehicle could be accomplished fairly quickly and easily.

Forward-Based Systems

The Soviets believe they have a strong case-- and one that could be particularly effective in influencing foreign public opinion--that US forward-based systems are a strategic asymmetry

in US favor and are a proper subject for bilateral limitations on strategic arms. Gromyko made clear at Geneva that they intended to use this issue as a weapon to keep the US close to the Vladivostok framework.

If the Soviets can achieve satisfactory agreement on cruise missile limitations and on non-transfer and non-circumvention, then we expect that they would drop their demand for a US statement on forward-based systems. If they cannot achieve these aims or if the US insists on sizeable reductions in the aggregate levels before 1980, then we expect the Soviets to continue to insist on a US declaration that forward-based systems will not be increased through 1985. The second Soviet demand--that the US reduce forward-based systems--is one they probably will not ultimately insist on.

The much more substantial demands the Soviets raise with respect to forward-based systems if the US presses for major "revisions" of the Vladivostok Accord seem primarily designed to forestall US pressure for revisions. The Soviets probably do not expect these demands to be met in SALT II. They will want to include them in their portion of the Joint Statement of principles that will accompany the Treaty and Protocol. The Soviets probably hope to use the US desire for reductions in intercontinental systems to force it to reconsider its long-held position that forward-based systems are not a subject for bilateral SALT negotiations.

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